

# **Title: Digitizing Deference: How Algorithmic Hiring Crystallized Legacy Power Structures in Modern Job Seeking — and How That Affects Dysfunction in Online Hiring**

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**Abstract:** As hiring moved online, it offered a historic opportunity to mirror the transparency and accountability seen in other digital marketplaces. But rather than democratizing access or correcting structural imbalances, algorithmic hiring systems — particularly applicant tracking systems (ATS) — have crystallized legacy power structures from the industrial job market. The result is a labor ecosystem that preserves opacity, favors deference, and incentivizes behavioral performance over authentic fit.

This article offers a theoretical critique of ATS, arguing that these systems have institutionalized a feedback loop of “performative professionalism,” where job seekers engage in mimicry, suppression of needs, and exaggerated alignment — a dynamic here framed as fawning. Drawing on theories of impression management, signaling, and power asymmetry, we explore how ATS systems entrench dysfunctions in online hiring: excluding qualified candidates, distorting evaluation criteria, and rewarding compliance over capability.

We argue that rather than resolving information asymmetries or improving outcomes, algorithmic hiring has automated outdated expectations under a new guise. This paper calls for a reorientation of HRM practice toward transparent, mutual signaling frameworks that support efficiency, equity, and trust in online hiring.

## **1. Introduction**

Hiring has moved online, but unlike other digital marketplaces (e.g., Airbnb, Uber, Yelp), it has failed to deliver increased transparency or democratized access. Instead of leveraging digital infrastructure to create a more equitable labor market, the tools adopted by employers— CRM systems, online job platforms, especially ATS platforms—have preserved legacy hierarchies that treat job seekers as passive subjects rather than participants. This paper examines the theoretical underpinnings of this phenomenon and explores how digitized hiring entrenches dysfunction.

## **2. Historical Power Structures in Hiring**

Long before digitization, hiring was shaped by a 1950s parent-child logic: the employer dictates the terms, and the applicant performs deference. This model was normalized in mid-20th century economies and perpetuated by cultural assumptions about loyalty, labor, and professionalism. The unemployed were often cast as untrustworthy, their worth needing to be proven through performance and deference.

But the origins of this dynamic stretch back even further. During the Industrial Revolution, the growth of factories demanded large labor forces, giving rise to centralized hiring

operations managed by early personnel and HR teams. Employers prioritized mechanical reliability and compliance over personal potential, often using rigid, standardized filters—such as physical criteria or unbroken work history—that increasingly detached hiring from any personal or local appraisal.

Through the early 20th century, scientific management frameworks—such as Taylorism and the Hawthorne studies—further entrenched the view that efficiency and control were paramount. Hiring processes became tools for enforcing behavioral norms and productivity expectations, sidelining relational nuance and local insight. This era established a precedent: job seekers were expected to conform, not question, and the employer held all evaluative power.

This paper and its author do not claim access to the full historical canon of hiring practices. However, it's notable that in the pre-industrial and early modern period, the regionality of hiring markets acted as a natural buffer against manipulation. Before newspaper classifieds and mass communication reshaped the labor landscape, hiring tended to remain local—grounded in mutual knowledge and community reputation.

The transition to national hiring systems—and eventually to digital ones—stripped away these stabilizing layers of mutual accountability. By mid-century, anti-discrimination laws such as the Civil Rights Act and Executive Order 11375 introduced important compliance rules. But rather than dismantling opaque power structures, these policies often added new procedural layers. The burden of compliance shifted to candidates, who were increasingly expected to self-police their behavior and presentation through standardized documentation and performance.

Today's ATS systems inherit this centuries-old infrastructure. Rather than offering transparency or flexibility, they digitize and automate compliance-first logic, enforcing legacy standards through algorithmic filters—without external accountability. What began as regionally grounded assessments has evolved into black-box systems that preserve historic asymmetries under the guise of efficiency.

This model—where the unemployed person is inherently suspect and the employer is above scrutiny—has become profoundly maladaptive in the internet age. But the market has yet to reckon with its historical inertia.

### **3. Digitization without Democratization**

The shift to digital hiring brought with it the promise of broader access, greater efficiency, and better matching between candidates and employers. Other industries that underwent similar transitions to digital infrastructure embraced information symmetry and user-driven feedback systems to help balance platform power. These systems evolved not just to support vendors or hosts, but to protect and empower the end user — the consumer.

For example, film criticism moved from centralized, authoritative voices like Roger Ebert to crowd-sourced platforms such as IMDb, Letterboxd, and Rotten Tomatoes, where user

reviews became key to audience decision-making. In hospitality and dining, platforms like Yelp introduced real-life customer reviews that allowed diners to choose restaurants based on peer experience rather than marketing. E-commerce platforms such as eBay implemented two-sided rating systems early on, allowing buyers to rate sellers and vice versa, helping to build trust between strangers in online marketplaces (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002). Similarly, the housing rental market developed platforms like Zillow, Trulia, and Apartments.com, which included features for reviewing both listings and landlords — helping reduce risk for tenants in high-stakes decisions.

Across all of these domains, reputation systems became a core feature in making digital marketplaces viable, functional, and trusted by their users. They acted as distributed information layers — filling in the gap that distance and anonymity introduced as marketplaces scaled.

In contrast, hiring technology — from early job boards to modern applicant tracking systems — failed to build such mechanisms for accountability. Instead of democratizing access or encouraging transparency, ATS systems codified the same asymmetric power structures that characterized industrial-era hiring. They automated opacity: hiding job posting accuracy, removing context from resumes, and systematizing the exclusion of candidates based on rigid, often arbitrary filters. Rather than reducing inefficiency or bias, ATS systems scaled up the gatekeeping logic of a previous era.

While marketplaces in other industries evolved around mutual visibility and trust-building, online hiring tools entrenched one-sided evaluation models. The job seeker — often over 90% of the labor market at any given time (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024) — remains the only unpaid, unreviewed stakeholder in a high-stakes economic system. As Fuller et al. (2021) and Rothstein et al. (2022) demonstrate, this leads not only to worsened outcomes, but to long-term exclusion that disproportionately affects marginalized populations. Where other platforms evolved toward mutual accountability, online hiring doubled down on institutional opacity.

#### **4. Theoretical Frameworks: Performativity and Impression Management**

Erving Goffman's theory of impression management (1956) helps explain how applicants perform curated versions of themselves to fit employer expectations. Judith Butler's concept of performativity (1990) shows how repetitive behavioral norms shape identity under systemic power. Together, these theories illuminate the emotional and strategic adaptations job seekers undertake within digital cages that online hiring systems create.

Fawning is introduced as a conceptual shorthand for this adaptation: it reflects the compulsive need to please and align with hidden, unspoken norms under asymmetrical scrutiny. This is a topic often studied in the field of psychology and trauma but it reflects a more serious issue for recruiters stuck having to engage with this as "professionalism."

In reality, job seekers' increasing desire to describe struggles in the market that was built post the internet age is often read as a decrease in "professionalism" when it is the

emergence of it for real. To engage with people about your professional experience and describe behaviors that have started to engage poorly IS what professionalism is.

Even the concept that “recruiters” can’t be reviewed is counter to actual business logic. Job seekers are literally the clients that recruiters were hired to engage with. In no other space is evaluating a “vendor” (in this case a talent firm) for the quality of goods they were hired to provide to the people they were hired to provide it to, considered “unprofessional.” Employers are reviewed on Glassdoor. Job seekers are reviewed throughout the hiring process. Talent vendors can’t be reviewed for the quality of the way they represent the people they were hired to represent to the people they were hired to represent them to? Realistically no wonder it doesn’t compute — it shouldn’t.

## **5. Structural Failures of Algorithmic Hiring Systems**

The labor market has historically relied on uneven information flows. Digitization was expected to correct this: offering broader access, better matching, and improved efficiency. While this transformation has reshaped industries from retail to media, hiring has proven stubbornly resistant. Digital hiring platforms, especially ATS systems, have reinforced rather than disrupted entrenched power asymmetries.

Rather than functioning as tools of transparency, ATS systems serve as mechanisms of structured opacity—automating exclusion, enforcing behavioral conformity, and eliminating reciprocal feedback loops. They have not democratized access to work but instead abstracted it behind layers of algorithmic decision-making.

Modern labor markets, as increasingly mediated by ATS infrastructure, reflect three compounding problems: inflexibility, linguistic mismatch, and systemic inefficiency. Together, they form a self-reinforcing loop of exclusion with significant economic and social consequences.

### **5.1 The Inflexibility Issue**

ATS logic functions on binary decision-making: if X, then Y. But the complexity of human labor doesn't reduce well to rigid “yes/no” filters. Criteria like “2–3 years of experience” or “no gaps in employment” are not simply factual—they're contextual. A system designed to disqualify outliers may unintentionally exclude the most promising candidates.

According to the Hidden Workers study (Fuller et al., 2021), over 88% of employers admitted that qualified candidates were screened out because they didn’t meet exact, predefined criteria. ATS platforms are fundamentally black boxes: applicants feed in tailored résumés, carefully worded cover letters, and selected keywords—then receive nothing in return. No confirmation of human review. No standardized notification of closure. No audit trail.

Errors in how questions are phrased—especially in legally cautious, user-unfriendly language—combined with time pressure on candidates, can lead to minor user mistakes

that result in automatic exclusion. Inflexible ATS filtering before human review has genuine financial consequences: longer vacancies, missed talent, and higher recruitment costs.

ATS can make the hunt for the perfect candidate an enemy of the hunt for a good candidate.

## 5.2 The Language Problem: Keywords, Misalignment, and the "Telephone Game"

At the heart of ATS sorting is language—specifically, how machines interpret human experiences through résumé parsing and keyword matching. But natural language is messy. It's full of synonym clusters, domain-specific jargon, lexical ambiguity, and embedded context that machines struggle to understand.

A major problem is the "Telephone Game" dynamic: where original job requirements are filtered through multiple intermediaries — floor managers, hiring committees, HR professionals, external recruiters, and finally, ATS vendors. Each step introduces linguistic drift. Even when the "correct" terms are copied and pasted, their context can be lost in translation.

Real-world example: a manufacturing company requested candidates with "plant experience." The talent firm they hired used their ATS system and interns to interview and send a slew of candidates. All applicants surfaced had greenhouse and biology backgrounds. Meanwhile, factory workers with applicable skills were excluded — their résumés filtered out by linguistic mismatch.

This isn't rare. Examples abound:

- "Training Coordinator" vs. "Learning & Development Specialist" vs. "Educator"
- "Teaching experience" excluding museum educators or corporate trainers
- Vague terms like "associate" or "coordinator" that span dozens of domains

Even fonts and formatting can trip up ATS parsing. As noted by Naukri RMS (2019), some ATS platforms cannot interpret standard fonts like Times New Roman. Résumés are rejected not for lack of skill but due to invisible formatting issues.

These mismatches suppress nuance and strip context. A human can see semantic similarity in seconds. A machine can't. ATS systems treat lexical tokens as truth rather than clues—and in doing so, flatten the signal.

## 5.3 The Inefficiency Issue

One of the original promises of ATS was efficiency. Yet labor market indicators tell a different story. Since the rise of ATS adoption in the early 2000s, average unemployment durations have risen (from 14.5 to 22.6 weeks), job vacancies have doubled, and labor market dynamism has declined (Statista, 2023; BLS, 2024; Fuller et al., 2021).

Rather than making hiring faster or better, ATS has led to an explosion of applications and a sharp decline in signal quality. Employers are inundated, while job seekers are ghosted more often. The result is a feedback loop: applicants apply to more jobs; overwhelmed employers add more filters and buy more ATS features to cope.

ATS performance also creates systemic biases. Candidates who can afford résumé writing services or keyword-stuffing tools (like Jobscan) are favored — not because they're more qualified, but because they've learned how to perform the algorithm. This introduces a socioeconomic skew: performative professionalism becomes a privilege.

Furthermore, differences in dialect and linguistic style disproportionately affect underrepresented candidates. Amazon famously abandoned its internal AI hiring tool after discovering it was systematically biased against women (Dastin, 2018).

Companies also keep job listings open for market-testing purposes, even when roles are not actively being filled. ATS helps perpetuate this cycle, creating the illusion of opportunity while generating volume without value.

Ultimately, inefficiency drives deeper inefficiency. Job seekers are demoralized. Recruiters are overburdened. Employers struggle to fill roles. But no one has access to the full picture—so everyone blames each other. The software profits, but the system suffers.

## 6. Algorithmic Hiring as Power-Preserving Infrastructure

The structural breakdowns identified above are not bugs — they are features of a system that centralizes control while distributing blame. ATS platforms operate using rigid filters, keyword logic, and binary qualifications. These systems reduce applicants to formulaic patterns, penalizing nuance and difference.

Drawing from Goffman's (1956) theory of performativity and Butler's (1990) gender performativity framework, ATS systems can be seen as enforcing performative compliance — nudging applicants to behave in ways aligned with the system's logic, rather than their own best expression. Candidates are incentivized to 'perform' professionalism through keywords, rather than show genuine fit.

Resnick and Zeckhauser (2002) highlight the importance of mutual feedback in reducing fraud and increasing trust in online markets. But unlike other platforms (eBay, Airbnb, Uber), hiring platforms offer no reciprocal review system. Applicants are reviewed but cannot review back. Power accumulates on one side.

This asymmetry crystallizes a deeper issue: hiring has no built-in mechanism for accountability, despite being one of the largest digital marketplaces in the economy. As a result, job seekers become product rather than participant. And software systems become power-preserving infrastructure—insulating decision-makers from responsibility, while amplifying exclusion.

## 7. Fawning, Feedback, and the False Face of Professionalism

Fawning describes the behavioral adaptation where job seekers suppress their needs and exaggerate alignment to please recruiters and platforms under asymmetrical scrutiny. It's a trauma-informed response, often mislabeled as "professionalism," and it's being systemically rewarded by ATS logic.

But this dynamic burdens every player in the hiring process:

- **For job seekers**, the pressure to constantly perform — to smile, to flatter, to conform — results in burnout, hypervigilance, and a loss of authenticity. It's exhausting to maintain a mask, especially when that mask is the only thing an algorithm ever sees. And then to be punished both for the mask's existence (you should be more authentic) and its lack of existence (you should be more professional) is also exhausting.

In reality a hiring system, by its nature that isn't encouraging a candidate to be authentically human always is trafficking in bad info.

- **For recruiters**, it creates a false sense of alignment. They're asked to assess enthusiasm and culture fit, but what they're actually measuring is a candidate's ability to fawn convincingly under duress. That's not fit. That's fear.

The pressure also to create a dynamic of increased fawning by their peers leads to the candidates viewing them as dominating figures not figures engaged in understanding. This leads to stress between recruiters and candidates.

But alternatively placing candidates based on their ability to fawn leads to bad fits with the employers they are often hiring for. This leads to employer/recruiter stress where recruiters are encouraged to get bad info from candidates (aka ask them to fawn) and then punished for the bad info they get causing stress from all angles.

- **For employers**, the fawning collapses once the psychological safety of employment is reached. Authentic needs, traits, and boundaries re-emerge — often surprising teams that thought they hired someone else entirely. Mismatches rise. Retention drops. Trust erodes.

This is not an accident — it's a predictable outcome of an unregulated, accountability-free hiring ecosystem.

Borrowing from Daniella Mestinek Young's work in *Uncultured*, we can even see a "guru gotcha" checklist forming around modern hiring practices:

1. Lack of enforced decency standards from recruiter to applicant
2. One-way loyalty expectations (job seekers prove loyalty; recruiters never prove respect)

3. No formal public feedback systems for the industry
4. Inflated claims of hiring platform universality despite no user-based validation
5. Life advice without credentialing (career coaching without standards or audits)
6. Purity testing disguised as resume screening (e.g., gaps, education)
7. Appearance and attitude control misbranded as "professionalism"
8. Systemic failure blamed on individual character flaws ("no one wants to work anymore")
9. Subtle economic coercion for speaking out ("this makes you unemployable")

Fawning isn't professionalism. It's fear and compliance by its nature. Not agency but a lack of it. In particular, problematic in an area where the goal of talent acquisition is access to quality information. It's creating compliance with out competence in hiring markets.

## **8. Implications for HRM**

Despite their promise to increase efficiency, equity, and quality of hire, digital hiring systems are routinely producing outcomes that undermine these very goals. ATS platforms and algorithmic sorting mechanisms, in particular, reward applicants who master the aesthetics of professionalism—curated language, keyword fluency, and emotional suppression—over those who demonstrate substantive alignment with a role or organization. This prioritization of *performative professionalism* over *authentic signaling* erodes the integrity of the match between candidate and employer.

In doing so, these systems not only exclude highly capable candidates—often those from nontraditional, marginalized, or economically constrained backgrounds—but they also compromise the employer's ability to retain and engage the talent they do hire. The illusion of fit created by candidates mimicking idealized traits under duress tends to dissolve post-hire, when the need for performativity fades. This leads to mismatches, culture clashes, disillusionment, and preventable turnover—costing companies both financially and reputationally.

For recruiters and hiring managers, the system creates its own double-bind. They are pressured to identify 'ideal' candidates through platforms designed to surface compliance over potential. They become reliant on behavioral cues—polish, obedience, enthusiasm—that have become decoupled from actual job performance. This reinforces unconscious biases, masks vulnerability as a threat, and strips the hiring process of meaningful human judgment.

Human Resource Management (HRM) must move beyond viewing ATS as neutral sorting tools and confront their role as structural gatekeepers. These platforms don't just process applicants; they actively shape the labor market by defining visibility, filtering human



complexity, and standardizing behaviors deemed acceptable. They are embedded with values that disproportionately reward conformity and punish difference—particularly difference in expression, background, or communication style.

Addressing these failures requires more than technological refinement; it requires conceptual reorientation. Hiring must be reimagined as a *two-sided market of mutual signaling*, where employers are not only screening, but also being screened. Where job seekers can express preferences, ask questions, and provide feedback without being penalized for honesty. Such a shift would not only improve trust and reduce attrition—it would redefine professionalism itself as something rooted in clarity, consent, and mutual respect rather than fear-driven deference.

## **9. Conclusion and Future Research**

The digitization of hiring has not democratized labor access; it has reinforced outdated power structures. ATS systems have scaled the performance of deference and embedded it in every step of job seeking. Their logic demands conformity—at the cost of creativity, contextual fit, and authentic self-presentation. Instead of recognizing a candidate's humanity, ATS systems reduce them to data points. This transactional model echoes hiring's industrial origins, where mechanical fit was prized above all.

As the founder of one such feedback platform, The Job Applicant Perspective, I recognize both the challenges and possibilities in introducing reputation systems into hiring infrastructure. The platform exists to challenge these legacy dynamics—not by throwing out technology, but by aligning it with transparency and user feedback, as other industries (from ridesharing to online retail) have already done.

### **Future Research**

To further examine the consequences of algorithmic hiring, future research could empirically study the emotional and behavioral impact of ATS systems on job seekers. This might include quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews focused on masking, applicant burnout, and the long-term effects of performative professionalism. How do candidates change their language, experience representation, or expectations based on their understanding of ATS behavior? What stress, alienation, or identity fragmentation results?

Researchers might also explore the potential of crowdsourced hiring feedback platforms. What measurable improvements in hiring efficiency, equity, or job seeker outcomes emerge when transparency mechanisms (such as mutual rating systems) are introduced? How might such platforms realign incentives for both employers and applicants, transforming hiring from a gatekeeping process into a genuine matching system?

Such investigations could include controlled experiments, longitudinal studies on job seeker confidence and conversion rates, or comparative analyses of job boards with and without embedded feedback. Policymakers may also benefit from understanding how peer-

generated insight affects market dynamics and whether publicly accountable hiring infrastructure produces better labor allocation.

Finally, future work could examine the effects of signaling reform — designing systems where applicants can genuinely express needs, interests, and capabilities without fear of algorithmic misinterpretation. What design features help capture context, intent, and potential without flattening individual narratives? Such research could support the development of hiring models that reward authenticity, reciprocal trust, and long-term fit rather than short-term keyword alignment.

Ultimately, the goal is to modernize hiring not just technologically, but ethically: to center the lived experience of the job seeker in systems built to serve them—not sort them.

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